

## The Voice Of Strangers

Who are the strangers whose voice the flock of Christ must ignore? I think I should meditate on the concept of "stranger".

### **"I Spy Strangers !"**

Fear of strangers (in Greek, *xenophobia*) is a recognised pathology. Some people are so scared of people-they-don't-know that they stay locked up in their own houses: they are prisoners of their own minds. English people often have this attitude to foreigners. The sad thing is when people assume that their mental pathology is in fact a strength, or even a virtue - a holy strength. Then their healing is a much more formidable task, because their impairment has recruited their whole personality onto its side. Thus Ulster Protestants and Irish Nationalists of a certain kind simply cannot separate their personal survival from the survival of their sectarian mindset: even if it leads them into murderous violence, they cannot see it for what it is.

### **Strange To Whom?**

Jesus does not call us to be like this towards strangers. Jewish piety has sensitivity towards the welcoming of outsiders, and we need to inherit that spirit. It is a truth about human beings that they tend to respond well if they are treated well, badly if they are treated badly. We must be careful to expect the best, so that the best can happen. So let's acknowledge that no-one is a stranger to God, who is the maker and redeemer of them all. Let's also acknowledge that, to be like God (and that is our eternal destiny) we must have the same attitude to others as he does. Pope John Paul II's great impact on the world was first of all down to his willingness to treat every situation as new, to be prepared to meet everyone with friendship, however far away, however different. He smiled benignly at the ranting of Mr Paisley in the European Parliament, he welcomed Mr Gorbachev with courtesy and charm. He refused to feel threatened or to threaten. In this he displayed a human likeness to God.

### **Making Ourselves Strangers**

We are, I say, none of us strangers to God. But we can make God a stranger to us when we become lost in the world. Forgetting what the world is for - its God-given purpose: forgetting what other people are in God's sight - sacred images of their divine Maker -

we can find ourselves living in a world that is estranged from God. He has put the world into our hands, and we can change it for the worse. You can alter a bicycle till the wheels no longer go round and the gears don't engage. We can bend the world out of true, so that it no longer works as a Creation, but only as a monstrous, sick environment where thousands perish of want and violence, and resources are wasted and exhausted, and disease and famine run riot, and hatred and lack of love are the basic facts of life for most people. Recognise it? Now - who are the *strangers* in such a world? They are the ones who have made themselves strangers to God.

### **Friends Of God**

A friend of the earth must be also a friend of God. I truly believe, and everything I've seen confirms it, that we can't love each other until we love God; and if we have a real problem about loving God, we are almost certainly bound for criminality, for a destructive and unhappy life in a cold and threatening world. That's why I get so irritated when Catholics throw away the practice of their faith. They are so infernally complacent - so trustful that God will always be in his heaven and they will have ready access to him on whatever terms they choose, as soon as it may please them to seek it. Why can't they see that in building a world centred around their own little dreams, they are losing the reason for living which only God can give us? Do they not realise how easily we can be lost in the ditch if we forget what we're all here for? A friend of God cannot refuse to love the children of God, and the first thing that happens to us when we cease to pray is that we cease to love beyond our own chosen group of friends. *Even the pagans do as much, do they not?*

### **The Risen Christ - Shepherd**

Jesus presents himself to us today as the Shepherd who has the voice that each human being will recognise and follow. He leads us safe, because he leads us to God, and to the purposes of God. He is not a distant divinity, but the one we crucified, to show our distance from the Father. Raised to new life, he promises renewed life for us. He can do this by reuniting us with the whole flock of God, no longer strangers, but many children of one new birth in him. *Fr Philip*